

The Death of the Competitive Intelligence Professional

Kenneth A. Sawka

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Consider, if you will, the following hypothesis. If the current economic recession is to have any lasting impact on the competitive intelligence discipline, it may well be that the downturn represents the catalyst that precipitated the demise of the corporate competitive intelligence professional.

Why? If my hypothesis proves true, in one respect the CI industry may have become a victim of its own success. To be sure, companies still require – and will always require --a competitive intelligence capability. However, by the time the economy is on its way to recovery, the full-time, professionally led and staffed competitive intelligence department may be as rare as a three-dollar bill. And with it goes the full-time corporate CI practitioner.

The widespread awareness building of the benefits and practices of competitive intelligence has made companies acutely cognizant of the need to develop sound intelligence collection, analysis, and reporting competencies. However, amid today's economic conditions, many firms are coming to the realization that it may be more effective to spread CI tools and methods among existing employees whose primary responsibility is something other than CI rather than staff and manage a full-time CI function. Already, the harsh economy has seen the demise of many longstanding competitive intelligence functions (not the least of which was the death of the corporate competitive intelligence function at Motorola earlier this year).

If this transformation continues to play itself out, it may become clear that the unified CI function model is less than optimal for how companies make decisions today and in the future. Organizations seeking higher levels of strategic flexibility are, and will continue to, move away from the centralized corporate decision-making model. Instead, functional professionals will be required to fully understand the competitive environment that provides the context for their specific corporate activities, and these professionals will need solid CI skills to succeed.

The lines between market research and competitive intelligence have been blurred for years. Today, however, many companies are successfully instilling competitive intelligence competencies in other disciplines, including ones as diverse as product and brand management, finance, R&D, strategic planning, and supply chain management. By equipping such

professionals with specific competitive intelligence skills, organizations are finding that these professionals can adopt an "intelligence mindset" alongside other corporate activities, improving decision-making and overall competitiveness in the process.

Take, for example, an Internet services client of mine. The organization wished to increase its awareness of its competitive environment by building expertise in competitive intelligence tools and methods. The company's highly decentralized structure, combined with its culture that valued empowerment of professionals away from the corporate center, made it highly unlikely that a dedicated, centralized CI function would have much success. We advised the company to target some 40 product managers for competitive intelligence skills development so that they could incorporate competitive analysis in their decisions regarding the management of the entire product lifecycle.

If my hypothesis proves true over the coming years, what are the implications for the CI discipline? For one, the number of individuals requiring an understanding of core CI principals would grow exponentially as companies require that their market researchers, pricing analysts, product managers, and R&D managers possess some level of CI competency.

Furthermore, the direct benefits of competitive intelligence to corporate decision-making may become more apparent as more corporate professionals apply CI narrowly to their decision responsibilities. Instead of a small centralized CI staff being called upon to provide intelligence widely to support a broad array of corporate decisions, CI can instead be deployed "in real time" and narrowly to day-to-day decisions on brand strategies, risk management, sales processes, and the like.

Though it may seem odd, the death of the CI professional may be just what the CI discipline needs to ensure its future growth.

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